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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 HILLAH 000021

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [IZ](#)

SUBJECT: ASHURA MARKED BY GOOD SECURITY, LIMITED MILITIA PRESENCE,  
FEWER IRANIANS THAN IN PREVIOUS YEARS

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CLASSIFIED BY: GARY ANDERSON, ACTING REGIONAL COORDINATOR, REO,  
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REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: The annual Shi'a commemoration of Ashura in Karbala and other parts of South Central Iraq on February 8 and 9 went smoothly. Ashura begins the forty-day period of remembrance and mourning for the deaths in 680 A.D. of Imam Hussein and Imam Abbas, grandsons of the prophet Mohammed. The Iraqi Police (IP) Chief of Karbala estimated that one to two million Shi'a Muslims made the walking pilgrimage to the Hussein and Abbas shrines in downtown Karbala city. The only reported violent incident was a single rocket that landed outside Karbala city on February 9, without casualties. Local contacts and REO Hillah local staff described the Iranian presence among the pilgrims as smaller than in the previous two years.

¶2. (C) Local contacts reported a strong Iraqi Security Force (ISF) presence in the city of Karbala, and that the numerous checkpoints in Karbala Province outside the city were largely manned by the IP and Iraqi Army (IA). However, there was a substantial militia presence in the area around the twin shrines in Karbala and a nearby Sadrism office and mosque. These were mainly Badr Organization and Mahdi Militia members, most of whom appeared to be unarmed. The private security force attached to the twin shrines, which is controlled by Sistani-affiliated clerics, was out in force and armed with automatic weapons. On the whole, local contacts judged security arrangements as effective and efficient. END SUMMARY.

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LOCAL RESIDENTS JUDGE ISF SECURITY AS EFFECTIVE, EFFICIENT  
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¶3. (SBU) Several days before Ashura, as the foot traffic was due to get heavy, the ISF implemented a ban on vehicle traffic at the Karbala Province borders. Only official vehicles and those with placards from the IPs were allowed past checkpoints. A day or two later, a near total ban on vehicles was instituted for the central city area of Karbala.

¶4. (SBU) Several local contacts described travel from points in South Central Iraq to Karbala as relatively trouble free despite the numerous checkpoints outside and inside Karbala Province. With the exception of Najaf, contacts consistently noted that they saw no visible militia members on the roads leading to the city of Karbala, with all checkpoints manned by ISF. A Diwaniyah newspaper editor who made his way to Karbala stated that IPs were thorough in searching drivers, passengers, and their cars at checkpoints, and that the IPs were professional. A medical doctor who traveled from Diwaniyah offered that his

trip to Karbala, which normally takes an hour and twenty minutes, took two hours (he drove to the edge of Karbala city and then walked). He credited the smooth ride to the organization of the police. The doctor said he saw people in civilian clothes searching travelers in Karbala, but it was not clear to him if they were militia. He stated that they were not dressed in black, which is the typical dress for members of the Mahdi Militia.

15. (SBU) Local staff noted numerous pilgrims passing through the city of Najaf, making their way to Karbala. Many visited the Imam Ali shrine before departing for Karbala. The ISF presence in Najaf was described as strong. There was a large number of militia members observed at checkpoints and walking with groups of pilgrims. They wore black clothing and most appeared to be Sadrists. No weapons were visible. There were reports of militia guarding mosques and other buildings that would be frequented by pilgrims in the city, and some of these militia members did have weapons.

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KARBALA CITY CENTER: LARGE ISF BUT ALSO MILITIA PRESENCE  
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16. (C) In the central city area of Karbala, where the twin shrines are located, local contacts reported a highly visible ISF presence. Despite the claim to the contrary by Karbala IP Chief Colonel Razzak Abed Ali, there was a substantial militia presence in central city area. A Karbala University instructor stated that militias, primarily the Sadrists (Mahdi Militia) and the Badr Organization, were conducting searches, setting up impromptu checkpoints, and organizing the various processions heading towards the shrines. He said that the militias tended not to be armed, and that no militia member who conducted a search of a pilgrim was armed.

17. (SBU) A Karbala-based REO Hillah staff member stated that the private security force of the twin shrines, which is controlled by Sistani-affiliated clerics, was dressed in black

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with "special badges" and carried Kalashnikov automatic rifles and radios. The security force generally restricts its activities to the immediate area of the shrines. He and another contact reported that in the vicinity of the main office of Moqtada Al-Sadr and its affiliated mosque (the Al-Mokhaim mosque), which is very close to the twin shrines, armed Sadrists were out in large numbers.

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PILGRIMS CHANT, CARRY FLAGS - VISIBLE IRANIAN PRESENCE SMALL  
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18. (U) As they made their way to Karbala, a small number of male pilgrims used chains to whip themselves and draw blood from their backs. Others used long knives and swords to make small cuts on their heads. This was done to recall the suffering of Hussein and Abbas, who died in a battle in Karbala some 1,300 years ago. Food and water stations spaced at regular intervals, manned and provisioned by volunteers, provided sustenance and places of rest.

19. (U) Travelers carried large flags of green, black, red or other colors to signify Hussein and Abbas' suffering and their blood, among other things. Four large fountains near the twin shrines were treated with a powder to make the water flow red, symbolizing the blood of the martyrs Hussein and Abbas. REO local staff noted that some traveling groups carried banners, and shouted out chants. The banners and chants were generally religious in nature, except for some chants by followers of Moqtada Al-Sadr and radical Shi'a cleric Mahmoud Hassani Al-Sarkhy, who were yelling, "We obey you Mohammed." REO local staff interpreted this as a response to the cartoons of Mohammed that have appeared in the Danish press and elsewhere.

110. (U) A Karbala University instructor who made the pilgrimage also reported a large number of banners hanging in Karbala for the United Iraqi Alliance (NOTE: It is not clear if these were

left over from the December 15 election, or newly placed. END NOTE). He also saw several groups of pilgrims carrying banners for SCIRI (Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq), Dawa, Moqtada Al-Sadr, and Mahmoud Hassani Al-Sarkhy.

¶11. (SBU) REO local staff and other contacts described the visible Iranian presence among pilgrims as moderate or relatively low, in comparison to the past two years (NOTE: The pilgrimage was not allowed under the Saddam regime. END NOTE). A local staff member saw some Iranians in attendance in small groups scattered around the central city area, but described their numbers as fewer than in 2004 and 2005. Another contact, the Karbala University instructor, indicated that their number was very low, stating that there were only "a few Iranians." In Najaf, in the area around the Imam Ali shrine there were, at any one time, a group of 500 Iranians. Six buses (65 passengers each) of Iranians were seen arriving at local hotels. Iranians were also noted at local hotels and restaurants in the evenings in smaller groups of five to ten people. At least some of them likely traveled to Karbala.

¶12. (SBU) COMMENT: Security for Ashura is a key concern for pilgrims and provincial officials. A series of car bombs during Ashura in 2004 killed more than 150 people. Overall, local contacts seemed pleased with security arrangements this year. This may be a sign of gradual improvement in the capability of Iraqi Security Forces. Although it was a religious event, the United Iraqi Alliance and its constituent parties took advantage of the captive audience of hundreds of thousands of pilgrims in Karbala to advertise themselves through the display of banners and signs. This was likely done with provincial elections in mind, which are due to occur later this year. END COMMENT.  
ANDERSON